

**TESTIMONY OF
FRANK HILL, CO-DIRECTOR
ALASKA RURAL SYSTEMIC INITIATIVE
ALASKA FEDERATION OF NATIVES
U. S. SENATE SUBCOMMITTEE ON
INDIAN AFFAIRS ON
S. 1905
MARCH 16, 2004**

INTRODUCTION

Good morning, Chairman Murkowski, and other Honorable members of the U. S. Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, ladies and gentlemen:

For the record, my name is Frank Hill, Co-Director, Alaska Rural Systemic Initiative;(AKRSI) a project sponsored by Alaska Federation of Natives (AFN). As the Honorable Lisa Murkowski knows, AFN is a statewide Native organization formed in 1966 to represent Alaska's 100,000+ Eskimos, Indians and Aleuts on concerns and issues which affect the rights and property interests of the Alaska Natives on a statewide basis.

On behalf of AFN, it's Board of Directors and membership, thank you very much for inviting me to submit my comments regarding **S.1905**, the Rural Teacher Housing Act of 2003. We applaud the efforts of the Honorable Lisa Murkowski in resolving the housing conditions for the teachers who teach in rural Alaska.

I ask that this written statement and my oral comments be incorporated into the record of this public hearing. I further request that the record of this hearing remain open for at least two weeks so that representatives of the Alaska Native Community may submit their comments regarding these bills as well.

My previous experience in Alaska education totals 29 years, including classroom math and science teacher, education program administrator, and 11 years as Superintendent. With the exception of 3 years in Anchorage Schools, all of my educational experiences were in rural Alaska schools.

Comments on S. 1905

Thank you for introduction of S. 1905; AFN supports this bill for a number of reasons, including but not limited to addressing the housing needs of teachers in rural Alaska. This bill, if Congress would pass it will solve one of the true human needs that exist in the education process as it addresses rural Alaska—the housing needs of the teachers and the educators in rural Alaska.

In 1999, Julie Kitka, President of the Alaska Federation of Natives, submitted a report to Congress entitled AFN IMPLEMENTATION STUDY. This is a 23 page document on

Proposals to the United States Congress to implement recommendations of the Alaska Natives Commission pursuant to P.L. 104-270. One of the proposals included in the AFN IMPLEMENTATION STUDY addresses issues on SUPPORTING ALASKA NATIVE EDUCATION. For example, one of the key findings of the Alaska Natives Commission's Final Report to Congress was **the critical need to create and implement programs designed to improve the quality of education for young Alaska Natives.**

The Commission found that innovative education programs were needed to help reverse the deterioration of socio-economic conditions and the poor educational performance of many Alaska Native children, the majority of whom attend schools in small and remote traditional Native villages.

The Commission also urged that parents and community leaders become compelling voices in directing Alaska's formal education system; that the education system employ teachers and administrators knowledgeable about Native cultures and respectful of them; and that Alaska Natives receive an integrated education—one that provides them not only with the skills to succeed in life, but also the understanding necessary to carry on their cultures' community values.

I raised these two points, in part, to demonstrate that it is critical to attract teachers and educators with qualifications to rural Alaska; and it is critical to see that they have incentives to remain in rural Alaska. One of those incentives would be quality housing as intended by S. 1905 if it is enacted into law.

The retention of qualified teachers and educators in rural Alaska has a definite potential of improving the quality of education received by the students attending the schools in rural Alaska school districts, I believe. Improved education by the students attending rural school districts will improve the chances of such students to obtain higher education—either college or technical with greater success.

The passage of S. 1905 will have the following ancillary benefits as well:

1. **Employment Opportunities:** Unemployment in rural Alaska ranges on the average, 60 to 80% in the villages. The passage of S. 1905 will create employment opportunities, at least during the construction of the housing units is concerned where it is really needed.
2. **Local Hire:** S. 1905 should mandate local hire of qualified people, both Alaska Native and non-Native, living in the villages where the construction of the housing units will take place. In this instance, local would mean people living in the communities where the teacher housing construction would occur.
3. **Improvement of Local Economies:** Local hire will have a short term improvement of local economies where it is really needed; and while these improvements may be short term, they will be beneficial to those communities.

4. **Ownership of Housing and Land:** AFN strongly recommends that the local village entities, including the local village corporation and/or local tribal entity, be given the first right of refusal on the ownership of the housing units in the villages. The housing units in the villages would be leased by the school district under which the local school operates. This will ensure that the landlords of the housing units are local rather than some distant owner.
5. **Program Policies:** On page 9, beginning on line 19, S. 1905 states that the Alaska Housing Finance Corporation, after consulting with eligible school districts, shall establish policies governing the administration of grant and loan funds made available under this Act. AFN strongly recommends the inclusion and the participation of local entities where the eligible district is located. One of the critical elements of the success of the housing units envisioned pursuant to S. 1905 is the “local ownership” in terms of policy of these units.
6. **Authorization of Appropriations:** During a recent discussion with a knowledgeable school administrator, it was estimated that at least \$100 million dollars would be needed annually to address the teacher housing needs in rural Alaska. AFN recommends that Congress considers actual appropriations of at least \$100 millions annually to implement the intent of this bill through the life of this authorization.

Since public schooling began in rural Alaska, even in the best of scenarios, it has been challenging to deliver consistently high quality instruction to Alaska Natives and other students in Alaska’s rural schools.

Among the many challenges facing Alaska’s rural schools, is the high level of teacher turnover, not just from year to year, but, sometimes within the school year. This disruption of the instructional process has been shown to be associated with negative affects on student academic performance.(Grissmer et al, 2000)

This high level of teacher turnover in Alaska is, primarily, a rural school problem. Alaska’s largest urban districts have historic annual turnover rates between 6 and 14 percent comparable to the national average.(1996-2000) All Alaska districts with turnover rates of 30 percent or more are rural districts far from the main road system. A study entitled “Retaining Quality Teachers for Alaska” , Wm. McDiarmid, UAA/ISER, 2000, demonstrated that a primary reason for teacher turnover is the lack of adequate or quality housing for teachers.

Schools are required to use precious instructional funding to recruit and hire new teachers year after year. Again, an issue only rural schools in Alaska must deal with in this manner.

In order to attract and retain quality teachers for rural schools, many rural school districts provide housing for their teachers. 11 rural school districts subsidize the cost of housing if district teacher housing is not available.(Alaska Public School Teacher Salary and Benefits Report, 2002-2003, Alaska Association of School Boards). Recently, a rural

school Superintendent told me that 8 cents of every school district dollar budgeted was to provide and maintain teacher housing. Yet again, another expense only Alaska's rural schools must deal with.

While a District Superintendent, I interviewed hundreds of prospective teachers for the District's rural schools. One of the first questions teachers asked was about the availability and quality of teacher housing in the community they would be teaching.

The funding proposed by S.1905 will be a welcome relief for rural schools. If successful, the funding could effectively increase the funds spent on instruction, and could lead to improvement in instruction, and better student achievement.

Providing funding for rural school teacher housing would begin to reduce the high teacher turnover rate in rural Alaska schools, thereby decreasing the costs of annually recruiting new teachers. The funds saved could be used in the instructional program instead.

I congratulate Senator Murkowski and the entire Senate Indian Affairs Committee for developing and sponsoring S. 1905. By removing the issue of teacher housing for rural Alaska's schools as an issue that negatively impacts student achievement, schools should be able to do a better job of providing a quality education.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this important issue. I would be happy to answer questions regarding my testimony.